

We Have Met the Enemy and He is Us

by Amala Wrightson

The whole world today, both East and West, seems to be going through a period of convulsion, a time of travail, as it seeks to give birth to a new culture. There cannot be one simple cause for the convulsions in so many parts of the world, but one of the major factors may be that while remarkable progress has been made in the use of new scientific knowledge, we human beings have not developed sufficiently spiritually and ethically to meet the new conditions. It is most urgently required, therefore, that we work to create new human culture by striving for a truer understanding of humanity and a higher level of spirituality.

This was written over 30 years ago by a Japanese Zen Master, Zenkei Shibayama, but his words are just as relevant today, and even more urgent. Thanks to scientific knowledge and the technologies that flow from it, we human beings in the First World have continued to increase our powers to the point where there is not a single point on the planet where our activities do not have an impact.

In low-lying islands such as Tuvalu, about as far as you can get from the industrial North, steadily rising sea levels are causing increasingly regular floods of previously habitable land. In a few years Tuvaluans may not have a country. The cause? Even the Pentagon and World Bank are now acknowledging the fact of global warming - and the role in it of the fuels burned mainly in "developed" countries to propel the world economy.*

Many other examples of the world's distress are evident, from an unprecedented number of extinctions worldwide to the murderous anguish of suicide bombers. How can we respond to such things? According to Zenkei Shibayama we are called upon to engage in a cultural project that unfolds in the individual but ultimately contributes to a collective sea-change. It involves nothing less than learning to master ourselves to the degree that we have learnt to manipulate nature. If we don't, we will continue on our present suicidal course, in which our attachment to material wealth is paradoxically leading to the destruction of the very basis of that wealth.

The problem starts in the human heart, in our desire to acquire more and more, but greed and aggression are also embedded in the institutions of consumer society. And that's where it gets complicated. We need to work on two fronts, simultaneously doing the inner work of ridding ourselves of delusive craving, and at the same time getting together with others to work at changing the way governments and companies do business. It's a tall order, but what choice do we have? I believe it's a matter of life and death.

A two-session course will be offered at AUT on Zen Buddhist meditation, addressing suffering and its cause at an experiential level, and providing tools that can lead to true self-mastery. With greater spiritual maturity we can become vessels of service, and, by joining together, a force for positive change in the world.

*See www.greenpeace.org.nz article, World Bank, Pentagon: global warming red alert